

In a modern world full of movement and interconnections maintaining a sense of self is one of the many challenges facing individuals and social groups. One strategy is to define self in opposition to others by emphasizing cultural identity. Samoans living in Seattle can be seen as a distinct cultural community with easily recognizable features that set it apart from the dominant culture and from other ethnic groups in the region. But as tempting it may be to succinctly define and measure this community, attempts to do so inevitably ignore the importance of cross-cutting influences and fail to recognize the fluid nature of its boundaries. Individuals have links outside the group as well as within and create a sense of self from a variety of emotional relationships and from multiple spheres of activity. Such complexity challenges the notion of communities as bounded entities and suggests a dynamic process of creating connections based on entangled cultural identities. One of the purposes of this paper is to examine the borders around this community as a way of exploring what it means to be Samoan in Seattle. A second purpose is to unsettle the concept of community and move toward a new understanding of it based on the reality of contemporary global migration.

The islands of the Pacific beckon tourists in search of a tropical paradise at the same time as the inhabitants leave in large numbers in search of better employment and educational opportunities. During the past several decades Sāmoa has experienced a major exodus with the result that over 60 percent of American Samoans have left for the United States and one-third of the population of Sāmoa (formerly Western Sāmoa) is overseas (Shankman 1993). Destinations for western Samoan migrants have been

American Sāmoa and New Zealand, and increasingly Australia, Hawai'i, and the continental United States. The first wave of migration from American Sāmoa to the United States followed World War II. At that time the US military transferred its operations from Pago Pago to bases on the West Coast. Civilian employees and enlisted men, with their families, were transferred primarily to Hawai'i, California, and Washington state. These families established households that would later serve as destinations for other migrants. Many among the first cohort of immigrants were able to purchase their own homes within a few years after their arrival (Janes 1986a). This has not been the pattern in more recent times; newcomers now typically live with relatives until government-subsidized or affordable housing can be found.

Seattle is on the West Coast or the "edge" of the United States and, with a population of 540,000, represents a model of urban American life. It is infused with the belief that it is at the vanguard of social, economic, and cultural modernity in the new millennium. The city shares the limelight with high-profile companies like Microsoft and Starbucks, while trying to maintain its reputation as labor friendly and pro-environment. The diverse population is not so much a melting pot of cultures as the product of a series of waves of groups arriving, each one for different reasons. Asian immigration and Pacific Rim connections cross paths with more longstanding American Indian, European, African, and Latin American influences. Pacific Islanders are part of this context.

Although I will demonstrate that there is no such thing as "the Seattle Samoan community," I apply the concept of *multiple communities* to show how Samoans in Seattle create cultural identities distinct from other groups in the region. In this paper a *community* is conceptualized as surrounded by margins that provide a space defining insider and outsider. Within this space, two core cultural values serve to connect Samoans: the importance of family, and the centrality of the church in daily life. Because connections are defined by shared cultural values, factors such as emotion and history are more important than physical proximity. One of the ways social relationships are forged and maintained across distance is through the Samoan institution of *malaga*, a journey made by formal traveling parties. As Samoans in Seattle today have told me, traditional values and practices give shape to the Samoan way, but the old rules do not always serve the younger generation well as they struggle to find places for themselves in America.

## WRITING ABOUT PARTICULARS

My analysis of the connections among and between Seattle Samoans is based on “ethnographies of the particular.” In this case, these include the stories told to me by the four individuals described in this paper.<sup>1</sup> One of the strengths of this method is that it captures the phenomenon of connection that is so central to these stories. The narratives of specific Samoans living in a particular time and place demonstrate the importance of various local and global interactions. Writing about individual lives rather than focusing purely on public culture provides an opportunity for insight into multiple ideals and the tension between the real experience and ideal culture (White 2000). The men and women experience their circumstances and histories not as actors passively reproducing cultural codes, but, like all of us, as people going through life, making mistakes, trying to look good, and finding satisfaction in surprising places.

Ethnographies of the particular are also appropriate for this project given the history of Pacific anthropology.<sup>2</sup> The method encourages the writer to move beyond generalizations that construct cultural difference by emphasizing homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness. Lila Abu-Lughod has proposed writing *against* culture as a textual strategy (1991). Culture (as distinguished from “cultures”) has been an essential tool for creating “the other” by applying an authoritative discourse that makes cultural difference appear self-evident. In the effort to present a coherent account of a group of people, generalization, as a mode of operation and a style of writing, has had the effect of smoothing over contradictions, conflicts of interest, and doubts that specific people in the community experience. By conceptualizing groups as discrete, bounded entities (“The Nuer,” “The Balinese,” “The Polynesians”), ethnographers have contributed to “the fiction of essentially different and discrete others who can be separated from some sort of equally essential self” (Abu-Lughod 1991, 153). One of Abu-Lughod’s goals for anthropologists who work in and write about the world at present is to decrease the distance between self and other. By writing in the language of everyday life and using the language of the text it is possible to produce a “discourse of familiarity” as a way to decrease that distance.

The four persons portrayed in this paper were not chosen at random, nor are they representative of the entire population of Seattle Samoans (as of course no group of individuals could be). As part of the ongoing process

of working with community members to develop a health education program, I have heard numerous life stories, listened to many conversations about *fa'a Sāmoa* (the Samoan way), and conducted approximately fifty interviews about being Samoan in Seattle.

Certain patterns emerged and now serve as a framework for the data presented in this paper. The four stories told here are ethnographies of the particular. They illustrate a range of experiences, and each is unique to its teller. At the same time, the stories are not uncommon and the themes they express are ones understood by many. In addition, the four share the common experiences of thinking about what it means to be Samoan. Perhaps because all have connections in communities outside their Samoan ones, the issue of ethnic identity has some urgency. Pseudonyms are used and identifying characteristics have been changed. The four have never met, and each of them read, commented on, and approved this paper before it reached its present form.

### SELA

Sela and Leilani both unexpectedly lost their husbands and became relatively young widows in Sāmoa. With several small children to support, the future looked bleak. Relatives in the United States extended invitations, and both accepted. Sela sold her house and bought her mother a new refrigerator before leaving her five children (ranging in age from three to seventeen years) with her mother to raise in Sāmoa. She first stayed in Los Angeles with relatives on her father's side. Although they made her feel welcome, that family was of a higher social rank than Sela and expected a certain degree of subservience from her. Sela bridled under this; here she was finally in the United States, and the last thing she wanted was to have someone tell her how to act. Within a month she moved up to Seattle and stayed with her mother's sister, an elderly woman living in a subsidized apartment building downtown. Sela eventually found a job and was able to send money home to her family.

During her three years in Seattle, Sela has adamantly refused to limit herself to Samoan activities. She made new non-Samoan friends, dated several men, and enjoyed her independence. Sela said that when she first arrived, she went to church with her aunt. Everyone was very friendly and wanted her to join all sorts of groups and get involved in all the activities. She knew she made them angry by not returning but said, "I don't want

to get too close to the people. All they do is talk, talk, talk. If I go somewhere, before I get home, my auntie knows. Someone has called her.” Lack of privacy wasn’t the only problem. “The people are good, but some are lazy and they always are asking for something. I can’t afford to help. I am here for my children, and everything I make I am sending home.” She sees no contradiction between her lack of church involvement and her own strong religious conviction. She prays daily, has many dreams about God, and says she is raising her children to be good Christians. For her, what matters is religion as a belief system, not as an institution.

Sela recently returned home to Sāmoa to provide guidance for her children who are not doing well in school during her absence, but she plans to return to Seattle within a year. She often talks about the importance of family and the strength of the bond between mother and child. Her relationships with those beyond her nuclear family are more conflicted. She speaks of those links as obligations. She knew her sisters and brothers and their children would be expecting lavish gifts when she arrived and she prepared by filling an entire suitcase with items for them. On the other hand, she anticipated a dispute over some land, and rather than enlist the help of her brothers and uncles, Sela planned to ask her eldest son to help her and hire a lawyer.

## LEILANI

Leilani also wanted a new start after her husband’s death. She felt that moving to the United States would provide an opportunity to do things differently. Her family in Sāmoa were surprised and quite verbal in their opposition to her plan to move to Seattle. There were relatives in any number of other cities, such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and even Portland, but no one very closely related lived in Seattle. Leilani and Sela both chose to come to a place where they could experience a degree of the anonymity that is associated with America. Leilani explained, “I don’t want someone always looking over my shoulder.”

Leilani’s only contact in Seattle was a minister and his family, who were distantly related to her. She and her three daughters stayed with them for several months until she found a house to rent. In Sāmoa, Leilani had a good job, and the skills were transferable to work in Seattle, so she quickly became employed. In contrast to Sela, Leilani chose to connect with other Samoans, but on her own terms. She has found a church where she feels

comfortable and is now a member of the choir. There are many requests made of her time and her financial support, but Leilani has learned the American skill of saying “no.”

Like Sela, when Leilani talks of her family, she is referring to her children. She has warm feelings for the rest of her family, and hosts *malaga* when visitors arrive, but she does not expect them to help her financially. One of her desires, though, is to save enough money to send her oldest daughter back to Sāmoa to get to know her family there and to learn Samoan values. Leilani is very aware of the problems some Samoan teenagers face in the United States, and she is very protective of her own children.

Discipline in general is an important topic among Samoan families. Parents are cautioned that if they follow the traditional ways in the United States, they risk being reported to the Child Protective Services. Discipline in Sāmoa is the responsibility of the family and not subject to legislation or scrutiny by others. It is described as firm and nonnegotiable, and corporal punishment is frequently administered. Children know what is expected of them. The church also has a role in the rearing of children. In serious cases, the chief becomes involved and settles disputes. Because everyone knows what everyone else is doing, if children are getting into trouble, a number of adults are in a position to talk with and keep an eye on each of them. The main point is that discipline is handled by people who know both parent and child. For Samoans living in the United States, problems with children are similar to those experienced by other immigrant groups. Parents may not fully understand the context of the daily lives of their children, and their ideas of discipline are at odds with the practices of others around them. Support from community and religious leaders is not always available.

Two incidents illustrate what Samoans refer to as “culture clash” over the question of appropriate discipline. In one case, a concerned high school teacher noticed bruises on a girl’s arm. When questioned, the girl said that her mother had thrown her against the wall in their apartment. The teacher reported the incident to Child Protective Services, whose representative made an unexpected home visit and confronted the mother and daughter. Both were completely surprised by the visit. The mother tried to explain about Samoan ideas of discipline and respect for elders; the daughter told the social worker she deserved to be hit because she had been talking back. The girl pointed to her little sister and said that just as it was her mother’s job to teach respect, she, as the eldest, was teaching her younger brothers

and sisters. In another case, a boy in middle school left home after a fight with his family. He then called the police to say his father had been hitting him. Before any investigation could occur, the family picked up and moved to California—without their son.

Stories such as these are told over and over again. The actual frequency of government involvement in family matters is not known, but the fear of it is widespread. Newcomers are warned about Child Protective Services, and parenting classes are offered around the city. Some migrants attempt to re-create the traditional social structure in hopes of maintaining the Samoan value of respect. Their approach is to keep their problems inside the group, discussing them in the traditional manner. The kava bowl becomes a metaphor for this aspect of *fa'a Sāmoa*. An opposing strategy is recommended by the social worker—an outsider and member of the bureaucracy—who gives lectures in the classes on parenting and suggests that school performance and success are best achieved with open communication and a relationship of mutual respect between parent and child. Faced with such vastly different methods of disciplining unruly children, no wonder parents like Leilani struggle to find appropriate ways of raising children to be moral adults, in the Samoan sense, but within the context of Seattle.

## SIONE

Sione arrived in the United States as a marine. He was first stationed on the East Coast, and then moved to California. After he was discharged, he went home to Sāmoa and talked with his parents about moving to the United States; they approved of his decision to do so. Seattle was the only place considered because he has a number of siblings already living there. Sione stayed with his brother and family for almost a year. During that time he enrolled in a community college and got a part-time job. He is now thirty-four years old, single, and lives in an apartment near work.

From the first meeting, it is obvious that being Samoan is central to Sione's sense of self. Although he is very gregarious and has many friends of different backgrounds from school and work, most of his social life is with other Samoans. He is an uncle to many nieces and nephews and takes seriously the role of being there for his family when needed. His church has a large Samoan congregation, and he is one of the lay leaders. Sione has a particular affinity for kids and has organized a number of popular social service programs for at-risk Samoan youth.

Like Leilani, Sione sees the Samoans in Seattle as a united community. Trying to put his finger on what it is that holds them together, he said, "It goes beyond family, it goes beyond any one church, and includes all Samoans who live here." He shrugged and suggested it was *fa'a Sāmoa*, but then admitted that the term means different things to different people. Sione drew a distinction between two approaches to Samoan tradition and culture in the United States. Some want to remain Samoan, hold onto their traditions, and stay separate from American society—to "sit around the kava bowl." The other way is to be part of America, but to maintain identity as Samoans. Sione prefers the latter approach. "You have to understand *fa'a pālāgi* (European or western ways) first, and then insert *fa'a Sāmoa* into it." The long-term goal is to preserve those aspects of Samoan culture that work best in the American context. Sione has little patience with those who say the United States should accommodate to Samoan ways by providing separate schools. First, he feels this idea is simply unrealistic—"Things just don't work that way." Second, such proposals increase animosity with other ethnic groups. "We begin to compete with the Native Americans, with Latinos and so forth for programs. When one gets something, then the others wonder why they didn't get it too."

In response to the question about which aspects of *fa'a Sāmoa* work well in the United States, Sione had no problem listing three: the family, the church, and pride in Samoan culture. Family comes first because it is within the family that ties with extended kin are maintained, and where children learn about their culture. They are taught to respect elders, and to say "excuse me" when passing in front of someone. Sione explained that it is very important for parents to instill this cultural knowledge in their children because without it they will never know the appropriate way to act in a meeting when a chief may be present. To some it might seem that these social skills would have little application in this country with its strong ethic of egalitarianism and the pride taken in treating everyone equally. Sione doesn't agree, saying he has found it very useful outside the Samoan social context. "To gain respect you must give respect. This is true in school, at work, and in social situations. When a child is taught this in the home, he or she is prepared to explore the outside world with the value in place."

Every Samoan I have talked with mentioned the importance of church, although beyond that general statement, there is little consensus on the specific role of the church. For Sione, the church was second only to the family in defining a person:



When I meet someone for the first time, he may ask me where I am from. He means what village, and that tells about the people. Then he asks from which *'āiga* [family], and my answer will be to tell him the name of my *matai* [chief]. If we talk further, and particularly if it is Sunday, we will talk about what church we belong to. These three things—my family, community, and church—are all intertwined. The religion teaches the children the values of the culture, they learn about their connection to their family and community. The family teaches about the church and the community, and the community reinforces the importance of family and church.

The fact that people go to different churches was unimportant. “All Samoans share the same goal, to serve God, to teach, to speak about the word of God.”

When a newcomer arrives in Seattle, he or she has a choice of several denominations based on a number of practical considerations. Sometimes newly arrived families are more comfortable with other Samoans and choose a congregation with a larger proportion of Samoans rather than go to the church they previously attended in Sāmoa. After a few years, the family may switch churches again because of a change in church leadership, or if they move, or develop a different perspective on the place of church in their lives. Philosophical differences between congregations are very apparent, so it is easy to choose one that matches one's own attitudes. Some churches are described as very traditional and authority is based on rank and social status. One woman laughed as she told me that some Samoans are more traditional in the United States than they were in their own village. Back home they had little influence, but in Seattle they claim a high position and take it all very seriously. Other churches focus on teaching life skills for surviving in America without forsaking Samoan values. One can find classes on parenting, after-school tutoring programs, and late-night basketball programs. Decisions are made by the congregation rather than by the minister and chief.

Sione's third point, pride in culture, assures that Samoans will not lose track of who they are. There is such a thing as *fa'a Sāmoa* because everyone from Sāmoa can more or less agree on a particular way to do things or a certain way of thinking about something. “We all share an understanding in the importance of family, the part that land plays in our lives, the strength of our belief in God.” For Sione these shared beliefs define Sāmoa as a culture, and all Samoans wherever they live share in that culture. Certainly there are Samoans in Seattle who have married non-Samoans, do not socialize with Samoans, and rarely attend cultural functions.

They have chosen to pursue the “American dream.” Interestingly, he noted, some of the people thus described are considered big heroes back home. They are sports figures or in the entertainment industry and go to Sāmoa periodically to run a clinic or put on a show. Sione thinks that, for them, being Samoan is still important, and even though they do not live *fa’a Sāmoa*, they understand it, and feel a strong connection to their home.

## TOMASI

Tomasi keeps one foot in Seattle and one in Hawai‘i. He was born and raised in Honolulu, came to Seattle for college, and feels conflicted about where he will end up. He likes Seattle and sees many opportunities for himself, but feels the pull of his family back home in Hawai‘i. When I first met Tomasi he was the president of the university Polynesian student organization and always began the meetings with a long prayer in Samoan. He is a natural leader with impressive skills in oratory and in organizing events. He is very proud to be Samoan.

Football was a big part of Tomasi’s life in high school. He was pretty good at it, and his success brought him a measure of fame at school and in the neighborhood. As the sport demanded more and more of his time, he had less time to spend with his old friends, tending instead to hang out with non-Samoans (mostly Filipinos) during his high school years. Although everyone cheered when he was on the field, he heard indirectly that his old friends sometimes accused him of being *fia pālagi* (like a European) or *fia tagata* (acting superior). He understood what they were thinking but felt it was unfair. Before his senior year Tomasi had to decide whether to stay with football and devote more time to it in the hope of being recruited by a college team, or leave the team and focus on other things. His parents’ opinions were split: his father wanted him to stay with sports, but his mother wanted him to get more involved with school. In the end, both parents supported his decision to quit the team, because, as he said, “Sports are cool, but they won’t carry me through my whole life.” Tomasi wanted to become politically involved in his school, and he was elected class president in his senior year. This was a very high-profile position, and he enjoyed the opportunity to make a difference in the school. He also found himself hanging out again with his old Samoan friends, who welcomed him back.

He chose to come to Seattle for college because of the financial aid offer

he received, and now he is paving the way for his brothers and sisters (there are seven) to eventually come to the area for college as well. Most of his friends now are Polynesian. Tomasi feels he is more Samoan in Seattle than he was in Hawai'i. Back there he took being Samoan for granted, but now he appreciates what his culture gives him. Among the aspects of the culture that appeal to him, he first listed being physically strong, eating a lot of food, and being able to dance and to speak the language. When asked what is *fa'a Sāmoa*, Tomasi began by saying it is humbleness. He explained that for Samoans, being respectful of everyone and behaving in an appropriate manner are signs of a mentally strong person. For Tomasi, physical strength is connected to mental or spiritual strength. When the Samoan fans in the football stadium chanted "*Fa'a Sāmoa!*" it strengthened and inspired him to give it all he had. It made him do his very best for all Samoans everywhere.

One of Tomasi's goals for the university student club in Seattle was to make it more inclusive for all Polynesians on campus (previously it was known as the Samoan club and had few non-Samoan members). His efforts have paid off, and now the emails sent to the whole group typically start with the greeting, "Hi Polys." The tactical nature of the expression was demonstrated during a recent community event. Members of the club were invited to attend a meeting arranged by an organization of parents who are dealing with problems in the city high schools. The adults were very welcoming of the university students and pleased to know that the club would be continuing its tutoring program for the kids. The discussion among the parents focused on how to help Samoan youth. At one point in the meeting, Tomasi stood up and very respectfully pointed out that the club is a Polynesian association. He explained that they want to break down the barriers that keep Tongans, Samoans, Hawaiians, as well as Micronesians, from coming together so that with the greater collective strength they would have greater power. The adults nodded, but continued to limit their discussion to Samoan children.

This incident is part of the larger discourse taking place around the topic of regional identity. While cautioning against assuming cultural homogeneity among Pacific Islands, Epeli Hau'ofa has argued in favor of a common identity based on the fact that all the cultures have been shaped by interactions between the people and the sea that surrounds the island communities (1998). This idea of a common heritage of the ocean was articulated at an exchange between a group of visiting Māori educators and the

Polynesian club members. The Māori group made a formal presentation in a classroom setting, before meeting with the students in a more informal setting. There, one of the visitors told the students how very happy they had been to see so many friendly faces from Pasifika at the presentation. These connections are important because, as he said, “we all put our feet in the same ocean.”

### CONSTRUCTING CONNECTIONS, CREATING COMMUNITY

Much has been written about cross-cultural encounters in the Pacific (see Feinberg 1995 for a review) and their influence on present-day cultural identity. The experience of individuals as they construct culture and invent traditions may be viewed through the lens of custom, which Lamont Lindstrom and Geoffrey White referred to as “self-conscious culture” (1995). Custom is that part of culture that, when acted on, serves to set one group apart from its neighbors. Particular ends are achieved by ignoring and creating customs all the time, such as emphasizing one’s ethnicity in certain situations and downplaying it in others. The politics of culture is at the very center of the “invention of tradition” (Thomas 1992), and the discourse of tradition is a political discourse (Turner 1997).

The so-called “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) or the process of “creating culture” has been highly contested (Jolly 1992; Keesing 1989, 1991; Linnekin 1991, 1992; Trask 1991) and the discussion itself is an example of the politics of culture. Vicente Diaz and J Kēhaulani Kauanui have characterized that discussion not so much a debate as a debacle, pointing out that native scholars and intellectuals have not been particularly engaged in it (2001).

James Clifford borrowed Stuart Hall’s concept of *articulation*, suggesting it as a more useful way to think about ideas such as “invention” and “custom” (Clifford 2000). Articulation refers to connections, in the sense that something that is articulated can be hooked together and can also be unhooked, or disarticulated. Applying this concept to conversion to Christianity in the Pacific, Clifford noted that there were elements of Christianity to which people hooked on easily, and other elements that they transformed. Articulation theory does not start with authenticity, so questions of what is authentic, or what is borrowed from here or there, do not matter as much. It also leaves room for the more interesting question of who is interested in authenticity. Not native scholars, according to Diaz and Kauanui. Nor is Tomasi particularly concerned whether he is inventing

something new or being authentic as he does his part to disarticulate cultural identity from national identity with his greeting, “Hi Polys.”

Similarly, Helen Morton was interested in avoiding notions of static cultural forms and fixed cultural identity (1998). She described Tongan migrants to Australia emphasizing cultural identity as a strategy for meeting challenges to their “sense of wholeness of self” and “providing the sense of continuity and community needed to balance the many sources of discontinuity and alienation” (1998, 6). At the same time she was careful to demonstrate both variation within group and multiplicity of identities within the individual. Considering the contemporary transnational experience of Rotumans, Alan Howard and Jan Rensel suggested thinking of people “*doing* culture” rather than “*having* culture” (2001). Communities in different places share a commitment to conscious, objectified notions of Rotuman language, customs, and beliefs. The communities are formed by acting and communicating; they are maintained through a process of cultural bonding.

As all these writers suggest, learning about diasporic identities that are multifaceted, and transnational communities that are not defined by physical place, points to the enduring importance of defining self, but in a world full of movement and change. Personal narratives are useful to illuminate this phenomenon because they are both, and at once, an individual product and a social product (McGrath 2000). The four individuals described in this paper are ideologically linked to new and old social and cultural institutions, yet the way in which each feels connected remains particular to each person.

Although island villages have been represented as isolated, homogenous entities, Samoans in Seattle cannot be considered a group in the same way. The Seattle group is defined by particular individuals who use images and stories to sustain certain ties, privilege certain customs, and create new articulations. Ethnographies of these individuals illustrate the processes of maintaining critical connections between home, the Pacific, and other migrant communities abroad and in the United States, and of establishing networks with different ethnic groups in the city, forging economic ties to particular industries, and forming international church alliances. The links go on and on, eventually forming a circle that connects those within it.

Although I have argued that the concept of community is fraught with difficulty, my understanding of the experience of Samoans in Seattle takes off from that concept rather than starting with culture, subculture, or ethnicity. One of the advantages of community over culture, in this case, is

that it discourages the tendency to perceive urban villages as transplanted replicas of those back home. A review of how this concept has been used shows that ideas about community have not remained the same, but have undergone transformations, slowly replacing images of subcultures, ethnic enclaves, or urban neighborhoods.

As summarized by Leo Chavez (1994), classical theorists defined community variously as the arena in which interest groups compete (Marx 1957), the result of social solidarity and cohesion (Durkheim 1965), or as a feeling of solidarity and a sense of shared identity (Weber 1947). Shared membership in a group such as a lineage or clan was important for early anthropologists (such as Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, and Redford), and this was adapted to the study of urban society with research on small homogeneous communities by Robert Park and Louis Wirth of Chicago School of Sociology.

In the 1960s, Ulf Hannerz created an image of a ghetto community in Washington DC. It had a territory and a defined population, but considering their working lives, many members of the community were more in touch with those away from home than with each other. What united them was a "consciousness of kind" (Hannerz 1969). This consciousness defines who belongs and who is an outsider. It is easy to recognize who fits in and who does not, but more difficult to list the necessary qualifications for membership. Community is something one experiences. Membership in a community is akin to "being there" with those who have a shared consciousness.

Difficult as it is to draw a boundary around any community to indicate who is in and who is out, migrant communities pose a particular challenge. Alessandro Duranti has suggested that some uses of everyday speech can establish a social and cultural space (1997). Membership in multiple communities means that physical proximity is not what defines the group. The notion of "imagined community" developed by Benedict Anderson (1983) allows for a redefinition of community based on sentiments and connections. This perspective places the ideas of "consciousness of kind" in the foreground, and emphasizes the fact that we all live in multiple communities. It also makes room for culture as circuits, not a single place (Clifford 1997). Men and women who are crossing borders, making multiple homes, and negotiating identity are doing so within a (political-economic-racial-gendered) context. They also are parts of imagined communities (which, of course, are not outside of those contexts). Research by Chavez (1994)

with undocumented immigrants in the San Diego area demonstrated the reality of multiple identities and the importance of community ties. The respondents imagined themselves to be part of their communities back home, and imagined places for themselves in their new host communities. Members internalized an image of the community with a sense of comradeship or connectedness. This image transcends boundary, is not limited to a specific geographic locale or a single community, and functions to highlight the connections migrants maintain with their home communities while forging links in their new homes.<sup>3</sup>

Connections influence identity in important ways. Individuals who live in multicultural contexts have knowledge of different cultures and are able to select among them when needing to accomplish a specific goal, thus expanding their personal cultural repertoire. Nearly forty years ago Ward Goodenough referred to this as the “operating culture” (1963). He noted that a consequence of increased contact with others is an increase in the number of cultures in the operating culture of individuals. Another way these conditions have been conceptualized is as borderlands with pervasive hybridities (Alvarez 1995). In her book about Tongan migration, Cathy Small made the point that one of the consequences of individuals maintaining strong family ties with those who stay home is a hybrid identity (1997).

Individuals negotiate identity, articulate tradition, and create culture within their communities. Recognizing the intersections the four interviewees navigate as they create and maintain multiple selves, it seems clear that the processes are more complex than objectification in reaction or opposition to the more dominant American culture. Sela provides a good example of the process from an individual perspective. How she defines herself is based on differences she has with others, but the others are both traditional Sāmoa and the United States as she experiences them. Her reaction to the obligatory reciprocity present in the Seattle Samoan community is to distance herself from church members. She is quick, though, to explain that her faith in God is strong and religion important in her everyday life, in contrast to those she observes around her who have a very secular approach to life. Participating in the “American Dream” with Samoan sensibilities requires a flexible attitude toward boundaries. This is not to say that being “bicultural” or having multiple memberships is not without stress. David Gegeo has described the frustrations facing Pacific scholars who live abroad and write about their cultures yet find they must defend

their indigenous status or Nativeness (2001). Later I will discuss research on a different type of stress among California Samoans.

Ethical relativism is another intriguing consequence of multiple communities. Cultural systems provide standardized formulations for evaluation of actions on a moral scale, but ethics is more often experienced by individuals as a dilemma rather than the simple mobilization of values. Samoans' evaluations of behavior tend to be more sociocentric than egocentric, emphasizing the social effects over the causes of the actions or the personal motivations. Bradd Shore (1990) and Jeannette Mageo (1998) found this to be true in Sāmoa, and I have observed it as a predominant form of moral reasoning among Seattle Samoans. Shore related an incident he observed while conducting fieldwork when a pastor advised a son to follow two seemingly divergent paths after the murder of his father. The pastor first publicly extolled the Samoan values of cooperation, harmony, and deference to authority as he encouraged forgiveness, but later he privately reminded the son of another set of values based on personal heroism, boldness, competitiveness, and loyalty to one's group and family honor (Shore 1990, 168–169). These contradictory tendencies in Samoan ethos have been noted by others (Keesing and Keesing 1956; Mead 1968; Freeman 1983), but they do not oppose the ethical and the unethical. Both paths reflect coherent values, although they may result in conflict when resolved in action. Resolution is far from simple, remaining problematic and partial. Shore concluded that “the relation between ethical knowledge, local culture, and the human condition suggests that we must never mistake the public expression of ethical discourse with the private and subjective apprehension of a morally problematical situation” (1990, 177). The individual and private is experienced as ambivalent and ambiguous, while the public culture is represented as categorical and absolute. His conclusion is particularly interesting to contemplate in circumstances of migration and multiculturalism.

The dilemma of ethical relativism is not lost on migrant Samoan teenagers, who are trying to respond to competing sets of values. One of the Samoan researchers with this study asked a group of teenage boys, “What is the hardest thing about being Samoan in Seattle?” They responded with one word: “*Fa'alavelave*.” This term refers to a host of family events that require participation by all members. Occasions such as weddings, graduations, funerals, visiting *malaga*, *malaga* going home, and all of the various church activities mean that food must be prepared, guests taken care



of, and gifts exchanged. One young man wondered why Samoans must turn everyday events into huge celebrations. Another student, who is a senior in high school, complained that no one seems to care if he has homework to do or a big exam the next day. If a family function is being planned, he is expected to drop everything and help out. His non-Samoan classmates do not seem to have any such demands on their time. These teenagers have a clear vision of the contradictions between different cultural values and ethics. On the one hand are the values promoting family ties and social harmony, but on the other hand is the moral imperative to do well in school and succeed as an individual. The stress the teenagers experience from these dilemmas can be resolved only partially by action.

As a cultural construction, morality changes with time, with place, and with person. For example, the knowledge and behaviors expected of a chief are different from those of a common person, and expectations of a Samoan in Seattle are not the same as for someone living back home. Leilani pointed out that morality also depends on who is doing the judging. In Seattle, older, more traditional people frown on those who have lost the language, who do not know all the *matai* formalities, who do not participate in the community. But some people who were raised in the United States don't care to learn the oratory speech and have no interest in what they see as arcane rituals. They are trying to make their way in America, and a moral person, by those standards, is one who is successful in the American sense: he or she has a nice home, has enough money to provide for the family, and is comfortably middle class. As Samoans engage in moral reasoning and negotiate ethics they do so within the context of Seattle. That context is described next.

## AN "INVISIBLE" MINORITY

The first complicating factor in describing the Pacific Island community in Seattle is the identifier "Pacific Islander." This is a label imposed by outsiders and reflects the fact that many non-Pacific persons do not distinguish between Tongans, Samoans, and Hawaiians, and are not sure where to locate Māori. Within the group there are indeed real connections, and a Tongan will refer to a Samoan as his brother, or say, "We're all Polys," explaining that their cultures have many things in common, and that they understand each other. The different cultural groups come together for large, city-wide events such as celebrations of ethnic diversity. But Pacific

Islander is not a term heard in everyday conversation. Each group has its own churches and social organizations with exclusive membership. Most informal social events include families from the same country. One can say there is a Pacific Island community that stands apart from other ethnic groups in Seattle and from the dominant culture of the United States. The members' own cultural identity, however, is Tongan, Samoan, or Hawaiian. Samoans in Seattle, within their multiple communities, make a further distinction between those from American Sāmoa and those from the independent country of Sāmoa. American Samoans constitute a majority, but everyone has relatives in independent Sāmoa, so that distinction is somewhat blurred. There are times, however, when separate identity is emphasized to make a political point. For example, a group of American Samoans attempted to ally with a Native American organization. By expressing solidarity with other native peoples of the United States they hoped that some of the financial benefits and social services resulting from the native rights movement would come their way. On the other hand, in discussions about the sovereignty movement in Hawai'i and the problems faced by contemporary Hawaiians, western Samoans often express pride that they have not been polluted by outside influence to the same degree as has occurred in American Sāmoa and Hawai'i.

Samoans and all other South Pacific Islanders living around Seattle are often characterized as an "invisible minority." This was true in the 1970s when a dissertation was published with that descriptor in the title (Kotchek 1975), and it continues today. While conducting interviews to assess health care needs of Pacific Islanders, a neighborhood community clinic nurse told me, "The problem isn't that we can't meet the needs of this ethnic group, we just don't know anything about them." Most outsiders are not aware that the category South Pacific Islanders comprises several different cultural groups. In contrast to other ethnic minorities in Seattle, little is known about their various political histories, languages, or health beliefs. The impression of many is based on popular media reports, which produce a picture of aggressive, physically large males who make great football players but fearsome gang members. This exotic image overshadows the rest of the population, completely dismissing women, elders, and children. Being misrepresented in western-created images is nothing new for Polynesians. It is interesting, however, that the earlier representations predominantly featured Polynesian women as sensual and free-spirited, but once they leave the islands the image shifts to menacing young

men. This is not lost on the Samoans, who either laugh it off, or explain how offensive it is to always have one's identity defined by others.

The official 1990 figure of 2,251 Samoans in King County (the Seattle area) was thought to be an undercount by members of that community, and in 1994 a collaborative effort between the University of Washington School of Nursing and the Seattle Samoan Center resulted in a community count of 4,029 persons (assumed to be an undercount as well).<sup>4</sup> Households are large, with most families reporting more than six persons living together (Plemmons and Tausili 1995). An earlier survey of 1,100 Seattle-area Samoans indicated that 58 percent graduated from high school or earned a general equivalency diploma, 2 percent graduated from college or completed vocational school, and 62 percent were employed full-time (Tausili 1991).

In the Seattle school district, in both middle and high schools, Samoans have the highest rate of expulsions and suspensions, the poorest daily attendance, the lowest mean high school grade point average, and a high school dropout rate of 25 percent (Seattle Public Schools 2000). Teenage gang violence was the most common problem reported to me by members of the community. Not everyone is familiar with the statistics, but they do recognize that many of the Samoan youth are having a difficult time living in two cultures. Ministers warn teenagers in their congregation that if they do not respect their parents they risk losing their culture. Younger children are encouraged to remain bilingual and learn the dances and other customs from their elders. Adults are invited to parenting classes to talk about the differences between child rearing in Sāmoa and in the United States. Unfortunately, police officers and judges are also involved in the struggles some adolescents experience.

It bears repeating that individuals experience culture differently. Situations of change for some teenagers and their parents present a conflict between cultures. For others, the same change provides welcome relief from the heavy hand of tradition and allows for personal growth. Craig Janes (1986b) also discovered a gender-based variation in his research on the relationship of migration to hypertension among California Samoans. One of the interesting conclusions resulting from analysis of his data concerns older migrant women. As they aged, they gained more family responsibilities for the well-being of their growing extended family, but did not attain the added leadership role and prestige given to older men. This translated into increasing stress as the women got older. Sela and Leilani,

the two women portrayed in this article, demonstrate another strategy for dealing with increasing family obligations by defining family more narrowly to include only close kin.

### FAMILY TIES AND CHURCH CONNECTIONS

As an identifiable ethnic group, Seattle Samoans are not defined by geographic proximity because families are scattered throughout the region. There are over a dozen churches with members in their congregation. No single leader or organization can truthfully claim to represent the interests of all Samoans in the region. There are differences of opinion about traditions. Some groups of families come together with the expressed intent of preserving the culture, while others distinguish themselves from the traditionalists by asserting their desire to help the new generation adapt to the United States. The latter serve as links between Samoan families and outside social agencies, such as the Child Protective Services and the Housing Authority, often being asked to translate back and forth as they travel across social and cultural borders.

Many other divisions exist among Samoans in Seattle, such as class differences, level and location of education received, degree of religiosity, and so forth. This diversity poses a challenge for governmental agencies and private organizations that prefer to deal with identifiable ethnic groups having clear and singular leadership. Samoans visiting from Hawai'i remark on how divisive the Seattle community appears. Hawaiian Samoans hypothesize that the further Samoans get from the islands, the more scattered they become. This may or may not be true, but Samoans in Seattle do feel they are all connected in some ways. What is it that unites them and sets them apart from others? In response to this question, there was nearly complete unanimity: "What we have in common is the importance of family and the place of church in our lives." Differences in how these are experienced are dismissed as unimportant. The critical point is that everyone knows he or she is part of a family, and that the church is part of the culture. The sustaining importance of these two features of the culture was expressed by the four individuals in this paper, and is supported by more general research on Samoan migration summarized below. Building and maintaining kin-based communities in a number of cities in the Pacific Basin and around the Pacific Rim is one way to assure the availability of emotional, spiritual, and material support during what may be conceptualized as long, modern-day voyages.

## LOVE AND BELONGING IN A FAMILY

Migration and resettlement are always difficult processes. Asesela Ravuvu (1992) observed that confidence and security among Pacific Islanders are acquired through membership in a kin group. Members depend on one another for survival, and maintaining group ties counteracts feelings of isolation and homesickness. Samoans coming to the United States follow a pattern of kin-based chain migration. Newcomers affiliate themselves with an *'āiga*. As described by Robert Franco (1991) and Craig Janes (1986a), this is not a residential group as it is often in Sāmoa, but a network of kinship ties uniting dispersed urban households. The smallest unit in the migrant *'āiga* is the household with the nuclear family. Several households based on kin relationships are subsequently linked and provide mutual economic and emotional support. These relationships are activated in times of family crises or major family celebrations.

Close family ties are important not only for those who immigrate, but for those who do not settle in a single place. In a study comparing the social networks of Anglos and Hispanics in Southern California, researchers found that ethnic affiliation was strong and kinship played a major role for both groups (Schweizer and others 1998). However, in the Hispanic networks, employing chain migration, the building of kin-based communities with extended relatives was particularly important. More characteristic of Pacific Islanders is circular migration, with individuals or families moving from place to place, often returning home after a number of years. Many Samoans have lived in New Zealand or Australia before coming to Hawai'i, then settling in Los Angeles or San Francisco, and eventually winding up in Seattle. Some will return to Sāmoa in their old age, or after making enough money to build a house. There is a relationship between ties to family with ties to the land (and sea). Hau'ofa speaks of this as a Tongan sitting in his new home in Suva: "Wherever I am at any given moment, there is comfort in the knowledge stored at the back of my mind that somewhere in Oceania is a piece of earth to which I belong. In the turbulence of life, it is my anchor. No one can take it away from me. I may never return to it, not even as mortal remains, but it will always be homeland" (Hau'ofa 2000, 470).

Although Leilani's family is very important to her and she keeps in close contact with them, the ties seem somewhat tenuous; she described them as situational, and to some extent, based on choice. Like many others in Seattle, she does not have aunts, uncles, or grandparents living nearby to offer

her assistance when it is needed, yet she is called on to help more distant relatives back home. The important function of family in mobilizing capital for major projects and occasions, explained in the literature (Macpherson and Pitt 1974) and experienced by all Samoans, is described more often as a burden than a benefit by persons interviewed in this study. Their irritation may seem at odds with the importance the respondents place on the family and certainly contradicts the ideal code that extended family ties are strong among all Samoans. However, even though Leilani and Sela focus their resources on a narrowly defined family, they both expressed a sense that it is within one's extended family that one can feel accepted and safe, and relatives are the people one can count on in times of need.

In addition to offering a sense of security, the idea of family has a reactive nature to it. Privileging values of kinship obligation and reciprocity creates an identity for members of a group that cares for its own. Not only Samoans decry the disintegration of family values in mainstream America. Disparate groups across the country sound the caution that if the family crumbles, so will society. The image of the Samoan family with its extended kinship ties offers an alternative to this dire prediction and serves to mark the difference between cultural groups in the United States with similar values, and the image of mainstream America with its emphasis on individualism over group welfare.

The four vignettes presented here provide a contrast between the women, who talked about kinship and church ties as often being constricting, and Sione and Tomasi who seemed to find little conflict in this area. It is interesting to hypothesize (following up on the Janes study) that these women are rejecting a cultural form that oppresses them. We often think of women as the culture bearers, the ones who in migrant communities have few opportunities to work outside the home and learn the new language, so are more conservative and resistant to change. Sela and Leilani offer another perspective.

### "WALKING INTO CHURCH IS LIKE GOING HOME"

The church organization serves as another unit for affiliation beyond the family. One of the first tasks facing a newcomer is to find a friendly congregation, which may or may not be the same denomination they belong to back home. Churches are a special focus of social activity and have been characterized by a number of writers as "urban villages" for Samoan

migrants (Ablon 1971; Janes 1986a; Macpherson 1994). Weekly services are supplemented by special meetings of choirs, youth groups, work parties, health and homemaking classes, and sporting teams. Families of different classes from different neighborhoods, whose children attend different schools, come together on a regular basis. As with any church, there are some members who attend only on Sundays, and others for whom the church is the central focus in their lives and who are involved on a daily basis.

The metaphor of church as urban village emphasizes its role in providing a social arena where social status, political power, and economic competition are expressed. In a village, the person able to contribute the most is rewarded with power and prestige. While this is true in urban congregations to a certain extent, how strongly connected individual members or families feel to their US churches varies widely compared to the sense of belonging experienced by members of a village. Status attained in a Seattle church may not amount to much outside that setting, whereas village power carries over to multiple arenas.

Another way to conceptualize the role of the church in communities outside of Sāmoa is as a symbol for what has been left behind. More than one person explained that the church is where *fa'a Sāmoa* is meaningful. It is also the place (place as institution and as image) where it is preserved. Traditional rituals are enacted, proper behavior is rewarded, and Samoan values are reinforced. "Walking into church is like going home," is how one woman explained the feeling to me. As a symbol, though, it is only a representation, and is not meant to be an accurate portrayal of the real thing. The intention is not to recreate Sāmoa in Seattle churches, but to highlight certain aspects of *fa'a Sāmoa*.

Attempts to achieve status in the church are described in paradoxical terms by Janes (1986a). On the one hand, active involvement with church and kinship activities sustains cultural identity and meets important needs such as economic aid, psychological support, and practical assistance. On the other hand, because participation is expensive, both in personal and financial resources, active involvement is a potential stressor. For those able to contribute to weddings and funeral expenses or to make generous church donations, greater prestige is amassed. People with fewer resources find it a struggle to adequately fulfill obligations to church and family both in Sāmoa and in the new home. The result is not only stress, but possible marginalization or alienation of the very people who need the greatest support.

As an institution, the church crosses kinship lines and may divide a family, but connects individuals because of shared culture. Even though Samoan members of a church are often part of a larger congregation made up of non-Samoans, they form a community within the church. The only criterion for membership is being Samoan. Church, of course, is not synonymous with religion, and the Samoan church serves as an arena where social ties are maintained, and particular cultural values reinforced. It is experienced variously as dominating and liberating. Its guiding (or controlling) function is concerned with proper behavior and correct values. As a safe haven, it provides an atmosphere of acceptance, familiarity, and comfort.

In a city like Seattle, where Samoans live apart from one another, with no Samoan radio or newspaper, the church also serves an important communication function. News from home about the transfer of a chiefly title, an impending visit by fellow villagers, a call for fundraising for a project, as well as local news of fellow Samoans, are all exchanged in the church.

#### CHIEFS AND GUESTS

Two other aspects of Samoan culture that were described as important to migrant communities are the system of chiefs, *matai*, and a pattern of visiting or taking a journey, *malaga*. Each family has a chief with titled status. In Sāmoa, the quality and quantity of the land controlled indicates the strength of the chief. With the advent of wage labor, and the presence of remittances from kinsmen overseas, sources of prestige have changed (Franco 1991). Because few paramount chiefs live outside of Sāmoa, *matai* in migrant communities vary in their status. Research conducted by Leulu Va'a in Australia suggests that untitled persons, by virtue of their new-found wealth, are demanding and obtaining equal rights with the chiefs, although *matai* continue to have social status in the context of ceremonial exchanges (Va'a 1995). In Seattle, few individuals refer to anyone as his or her *matai*. People identify with the chief back home, and the link is privileged through the institution of *malaga*.

Group visiting strengthens important social and political relationships within the family, the village, and the church. It also serves to channel wealth from overseas into Sāmoa. Family transitions, such as births, weddings, chiefly installations, and funerals, are cause for *malaga*, as are other occasions such as church conferences and fund-raisers. Extended families,



church congregations, or village groups prepare for the *malaga* by practicing dances and songs so they can entertain their hosts. The hosts, in turn, are responsible for ensuring the trip is a success for the guests. This entails making arrangements for travel, housing, and food, which can quickly become quite expensive and complex to organize. *Malaga* may serve an additional function in relation to migratory patterns. One explanation for the large number of persons migrating from western to American Sāmoa is that after every *malaga*, a few members will request, or they will be asked, to remain after the event (Va'a 1992). *Malaga* serves as the impetus for travel, and then family ties encourage longer stays. The same process occurs with overseas migration, and several individuals describe remaining in Seattle after a *malaga*.

## CONCLUSIONS

The question of how individuals talk about *fa'a Sāmoa* in Seattle is at first glance fairly straightforward. The importance of family and church was expressed by everyone, including Sela, who was determined not to be part of the church in a reactive move to distance herself from the church members. It would seem these traditional values have endured in the face of culture change. This confirms a study conducted by Cluny Macpherson and David Pitt in New Zealand who also identified the extended family (*'āiga*) and the Samoan church as two key institutions (1974). Similarly, when Va'a studied *fa'a Sāmoa* in Australia, he found a pattern of continuities between life in Sāmoa and in Sydney (1995). However, Duranti's analysis comparing everyday discourse in Sāmoa with that in Los Angeles pointed out the reality that although families may be talking about the same thing and using the same language, interpretations vary. He suggested that different ways of talking can be seen as an index of change and help elucidate how identity and place are negotiated (Duranti 1997). I have suggested in this paper that the enduring importance of family and church are part of a persistent and continuous nexus (borrowing Clifford's use of the term) in response to a changing context. These institutions are experienced differently and have changed meanings for individuals in Seattle as compared to Sāmoa.

Social science literature has suggested the critical role that a sense of community plays in defining self as distinct from other. These matters of identity are interwoven with the substance of tradition. In this paper, data

from interviews illustrate the process of negotiating identity, complete with contradictions, challenges, and accommodations. The stories, or ethnographies of the particular, also highlight the reality of multiple selves.

The data also suggest that Samoans in Seattle are bound by an ideal moral code based on their family responsibilities and church obligations. As with all moral codes, there is a discrepancy between the ideal and the real. To the extent that there is a public Seattle Samoan community, it remains vibrant through this ongoing process of articulation. However, if only the public is highlighted and if private and individual ethical discourse were not included, just half the story would be told.

Sione's discussion of respect provides a good example of the process of articulating tradition. The behavior he described of always saying "excuse me" when passing in front of a person of rank serves to maintain the traditional stratified social structure in Sāmoa. Certainly the United States is not a classless society, but it is not stratified along the same lines as Polynesian societies. Sione told how this same attitude of respect can be used in American settings, not as a sign of acknowledging status, but as a strategy for making a good impression in order to further oneself by succeeding in a school and work environment. The behavior has not changed, but its context and meaning have.

Tomasi's comment about being more Samoan in the United States than at home, and his conscious use of the term "Poly," capture the process of articulation and the nature of culture as something dynamic, vibrant, and changeable over time and across place. Images of *fa'a Sāmoa*, the sea, and Seattle are all shaping his own personal identity as a Samoan.

Leilani has given a great deal of thought to the question of what defines the Samoan community for those living outside the country. It's not as easy as it was back home. As Leilani said, "There we do everything together." Social relations are centered around the village. In contrast, activities in Seattle lack a central focus. There are family celebrations, church affairs, and city festivals, but the groups do not necessarily overlap, and individuals have different links with each. Leilani gave this example: "In Sāmoa, if an important person comes, there is no question, everyone will work together to organize the day. Here, if the Governor, or some other person comes from Sāmoa, you will first think about whether attending the event will meet any of your needs. Maybe it is more important to spend the day with your children. If you are connected in some way, either through your relatives or your church, you will participate in events, but also you think about yourself more."

The implications of this transition to an individualistic style of social behavior are clear to all the interviewees. They see it as an inevitable consequence of living in a place where one must be a member of many communities in order to survive. The church remains the place where *fa'a Sāmoa* gets played out, and as such it is an important place to reaffirm identity, to reinforce values, and to meet socially with friends and family. It may not be the best place for help if children are having problems at school, however. A parent must be a member of the school community for that. Family is important, but relatives have their own financial obligations and cannot always be counted on to help out. Work environment and coworkers are a type of community. The neighborhood, which may or may not include other Samoans, is another community to feel part of. And finally, although no one described it in these terms, Sāmoa itself is an additional community. No matter how long a person has lived overseas, there is always the land, a village, a church, a *matai*, an *'āiga*, that may be claimed as one's own.

This conclusion takes us back to the original question of how to describe this community. Thus far we have defined it in opposition to European-American culture, but relations with other ethnic or migrant communities are equally important. Some connections result from physical proximity. In a Catholic Church in Seattle, the Samoan choir alternates with the Filipino choir to sing at Sunday Mass. In another part of town, the Seattle Samoan Center shares a building with El Centro de la Raza. Cooperative arrangements like these lead to closer social ties. Relations with Asian-Americans are more complex. Prior to the 2000 census, the US government used the identifier Asian-Pacific Islander, lumping Pacific Islanders with Asian-Americans. Because of their relatively small numbers, Pacific Islanders became an invisible minority (to outsiders). In terms of health research, it is almost impossible to find statistics on Pacific Islanders separate from Asian-Americans. Health services such as community clinics for Asian-Americans are intended to meet the needs of Pacific Islanders as well. This is based on the faulty assumption that there is a shared Asian-Pacific Islander culture. Because of this bureaucratic categorization, the two groups do have connections, but these are often conflicted.

Although outsiders have difficulty identifying the Samoan community, its members have no such problem. It is an *imagined* community, which is nothing like an *imaginary* community. The sense of connectedness is strong, the obligations are real. The boundaries of the multiple communities are flexible, allowing for membership in several simultaneously.

Depending on the situation, one is a member in a Samoan church community, a neighborhood community, or a school community. The reality of cross-cutting influences on daily life requires a language that resists essentializing and instead speaks to multiple selves, identities, and communities.

The impetus for identifying the Samoan community for the Seattle research project is to apply this understanding in developing a youth education program that is relevant to the social context. Certainly appreciation of shared cultural values is critical and should not be lost in a process of deconstructing the concept of community. It is also important to have knowledge of the wide social net (and the entangled relationships within it) that contains Seattle Samoan communities. The conceptualization of the space that defines these must accommodate the reality of tremendous movement of people and ideas so that the net that is thrown wide to include other local ethnic groups, Pacific Islanders living in different regions of the United States, various migrant communities around the Pacific, and Sāmoa itself. And finally, an additional challenge for anthropologists who are involved in social change is to conceptualize the communities as agents of change in themselves.

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## Notes

1 Data were obtained as part of a research study to develop an HIV prevention program for US Pacific Islander adolescents, "Project *Talanoa*: Teens Choosing Healthy Lives" (NIH NRO4377). Before the intervention could be planned, it was necessary to identify the community. This paper is a discussion of those findings. The methods used in this study include participant observation, unstructured interviews, and group discussion.

2 It is significant that Samoans are often the subject of efforts to problematize concepts of identity, culture, and community. Polynesians are among the most "represented" people in the world, beginning with the multiple photographic and written essays in *National Geographic Magazine* (Webster 1899; Morgan 1990; Bailey 1941; Shadbolt and Goodman 1962; Rockefeller and others 1974; Booth and Berge 1985; Talbot and Tourtellot 1998), through the popular works of Margaret Mead (1961 [1928]), and in more recent contemporary works such as an interpretive ethnography by anthropologist Bradd Shore (1982) and novels and poetry by Samoan writers such as Albert Wendt (1973, 1995) and Sia Figiel (1999). Some of these texts have served as background material for the academic debate concerning the nature of ethnography.

3 Social scientists are not the only ones dealing with the definition of community. A new comprehension of community is also occurring in the area of social policy where increasing emphasis is placed on viewing the community itself as the change agent (Bhattacharyya 1995). This contrasts with the more traditional way of depending on (and funding) professional service providers and advocacy groups to make changes “for the good of the people.” Community in this context is defined as the social place used by family, friends, neighbors, and local associations. It is the informal sector where social action is a result of people acting through consent (McKnight 1987). The communities are imagined in the same sense described above. When one belongs, one feels it, when an outsider enters, one feels that too.

Social activists contrast associations of community with the structure of institutions that are designed for control. Within institutions of the criminal, educational, and health care systems, roles exist for community members to fill, such as “repeat offender,” “non-compliant patient,” “drop-out.” Obviously, viewing the community as a type of social organization instead of a mix of special problems has great implications. In anthropology, we also study institutions with rules. Kinship, religious, and political systems traditionally have been the focus of study, with individual members submerged in the institutions. Whenever attention is directed solely to institutions, general homogenizing characteristics of the actor-members are all that come to be known. The other is thus created.

4 The US Census 2000 figure for Samoans in King County is 4,182. Again, this is assumed to be an undercount.

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### *Abstract*

The paper reviews the concept of community as it has been used by social scientists to describe groups of people, and explores how it might be developed to understand the experience of diasporic communities. Although community avoids some of the essentializing tendencies that are inherent in the concept of culture, the classic use of community fails to acknowledge the reality of travel, and the transcultural, transnational movement of people and ideas. Four Samoan individuals who live in Seattle are portrayed using the method of “ethnography of the particular” to illustrate the cross-cutting influences of their lives and the fluid nature of the boundaries that surround their multiple communities. Shared values of the importance of family ties and church connections help to define what it means to be Samoan in Seattle.

KEYWORDS: Sāmoa, diaspora, *fa'a Sāmoa*, culture, identity